Rethinking the Beginning: Toni Morrison and the Dramatization of Liminality

Dreiding, Michelle

Michelle Dreiding
E-mail: michelle.dreiding@es.uzh.ch

Rethinking the Beginning: Toni Morrison and the Dramatization of Liminality

Abstract:

Beginnings in Toni Morrison's novels enact an uncanny moment of disorientation. They are beginnings *in medias res*, and, more importantly, beginnings of spatial deictic uncertainties that leave a reader with the absence of a stable system of reference. They enact the predicament of a beginning that precludes the fantasy of an absolute point of origin. Morrison's beginnings self-consciously advocate an imperative to engage in a continual process of re-reading, of revisiting the initial disorientation so as to avoid a "conclusion to living." (Nietzsche) I want to argue that it is in these liminal moments of beginnings of novels that Morrison actualizes the particularly American discourse of the frontier; the privileged locus of "perennial rebirth." (Turner) It is within this discursive American space of potentiality and of a compulsive return to the border that Toni Morrison sets out to a revisionist project, rewriting the American myth of the frontier and moving to the center a narrative that has been culturally marginalized.
The paper presents readings of the incipits of Morrison's novels *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997) and *Love* (2003); incipits that dramatize a structural and geographical liminality, that establish a spatial poetics necessary for the political project, and that open up the dialogical possibility to "draw a map […] without the mandate for conquest." (Morrison)

Biography:

Michelle Dreiding is a research and teaching assistant at the English Department of the University of Zurich. She holds a Lizenziats degree (M.A.) in French and English Literature from the University of Zurich. Her research interests include narratives of trauma, psychoanalytical theory, modern and postmodern literature, and film. Michelle Dreiding is currently working on her PhD thesis on the chronotopic representation of beginnings in American literature.

Style guide: MLA

Key words: Literature, Place & Space, Race & Ethnicity

I hereby authorize the following paper to be reviewed for publication in Reconstruction. The paper is currently not under review elsewhere, nor has it previously been published in whole or in part.

Rethinking the Beginning: Toni Morrison and the Dramatization of Liminality

> Comme j'aimerais que mes mots,
> assurés de leur lieu d'origine et de faire
> retour, soient des oiseaux migrateurs !
>
> *J.-B. Pontalis*

Paradise. A Precarious Space

<1> Beginnings in Toni Morrison's novels enact an uncanny moment of disorientation. They are beginnings *in medias res*, and, more importantly, beginnings of spatial deictic uncertainties that leave a reader with the absence of a stable system of reference. A particularly unsettling example is the beginning of *Paradise*, novel published in 1997:

> They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out here. They are seventeen miles from a town which has ninety miles between it and any other. Hiding places will be plentiful in the Convent, but there is time and the day has just begun. (3)

The very first two sentences *"They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time."* come as a shock; the shock of utter physical violence on the one hand, but also the shock of coming into language out of a moment of silence. This coming into language is unsettling, I would argue, for yet another reason: instead of offering a reliable system of signifiers with an identifiable reference, the deictic uncertainties, that is the "out here", the unidentified town, and the "there" in "there is time", destabilize the fantasy of a homely and identifiable topography. *"No need to hurry out here. They are seventeen miles from a town which has ninety miles between it and any other."* Where are we? We must ask ourselves. The mapping of this initial territory is thought in relational terms, that is, the indication of the distances between the "out here", the "town", and "any other [town]." But the mapping of this space that is constituted by its respective distances proves to be ineffective because the vantage point, as it were, the "out here" is a deixis that at this moment of the narrative does not point anywhere at all. We are "here", in the text's immediacy, but we are "out" as well, out of place somehow, at a loss of orientation. Because not only is the place identified in an ironic destabilization of precise indications of distance, but so are the relations between the victims and their perpetrators. The only pivotal point, which the

narrative does provide and which could give us a sense of the motive for the act of violence, is the place of the Convent. But rather than providing a precise spatial indication, the place points to a particular function: the convent is a gendered space, an enclosed space and a sacred space. The shooting thus is an act of penetration into the Convent if we presume that it is the place where the 'white girl' and 'the rest' have been residing. In such a reading the shooting would then at the same time be a sexual violation because the female body is likened to the convent in a metonymic figuration. However, both spatial relations, distances in this case, and precise interpersonal relations, that is 'Why are the girls violated and shot?' and 'What is their relation to the shooters?' are as of yet unintelligible and cannot position the reader in a comfortable voyeuristic position. In addition, one will also want to note that the authoritative voice of the narrative is unclear at this point. To whom can it be attributed? Uncannily connected to the perpetrator, and yet disembodied. A voice out of body and out of place.

<2> This is the moment where disorientation is enacted. But it is simultaneously the moment, I would argue, where the imperative for a kind of re-orientation, or a new orientation is self-consciously reflected on. The self-conscious absence of context, or rather insecurity of context positions *Paradise*'s beginning at the other end of the dichotomy that Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* (1946) establishes between the Homeric epic and *Genesis*. Whereas the former, the Homeric epic, is a text "externalized, a uniformly illuminated phenomena", happening at a "definite time and a definite place" (11), *Genesis*, on the other hand is a text "fraught with background": it is an "externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else is left in obscurity. […] Time and place are undefined and call for interpretation." (11) In analogy to what Auerbach identifies in *Genesis* as the "representation" of the "development of the historically becoming, and the preoccupation with the problematic," (23) *Paradise* in a similar way is a preoccupation with the problematic as a way, and in Morrison's case an imperative to reflect on a historically becoming—historically becoming which can figure as a viable African American alternative to the dominant discourse of the White American cultural imaginary.

<3> But before the exact nature of the historically becoming in Morrison can be identified, attention needs to be re-directed to the geographical insecurities of *Paradise*'s beginning: the mapping of the geography of the "out here" has proven to be unstable in terms of linguistically identifiable signifiers. However, the beginning of *Paradise* establishes an autarkic textual space, a system of textual references that, at this point in the narrative, i.e. at the beginning substitutes the purely geographical and linguistic insecurities. There is the intertextual relationship to *Genesis* in an Auerbachian sense. But there is also the title of Morrison's novel, *Paradise*, which inscribes it explicitly in the biblical tradition of creation and becoming, the beginning of the world. Revisiting the deictic uncertainties that the "out here" etc. represent in Morrison, then their non-referential deixes have to be considered in the light of this peritext, namely the title. In fact, however, this intertextual relationship does not contribute to a comforting identification with textual familiarity. Instead, the peritextual information is immediately destabilized by the act of violence. Of course, the Garden of Eden, the biblical Paradise, too, is a place of violence, that is a place that can discursively only be thought of in the expulsion to come. Paradise can never be perpetuated. Paradise is always also paradise lost. But it also always dramatizes the utopian fantasy of regression in a psychoanalytical understanding of the term [1]. Safe from harm and phantasmagorically ideal.

In Morrison's *Paradise*, however, the initial fantasy is temporally reversed. Paradise first, in terms of text time, is the place where violence is enacted. Only in the course of the narrative is the phantasmagorical ideal of Paradise developed. Orientation, or rather re-orientation in *Paradise*, the novel, is self-reflexive. Thought of only as textual becoming. And of course, it is only retroactively, in re-reading that the beginning of the novel can become fully intelligible; including its geography as well as its interpersonal relationships. The beginning of Toni Morrison's *Paradise* self-consciously dramatizes a liminal moment, a textual frontier, that needs to be returned to. It is through retrospection only that the deixes, that is the 'they' of the shooters, the 'out here', the 'town', the 'Convent' and the relations of distance become fully comprehensible. Returning to the beginning, to the frontier, however, also implies a novel reflection on the starting point; it is a repetition with a difference. In this sense then, the beginning can never be absolute. It cannot function as the absolute origin of the narrative. It is always inscribed in both an inter- and intratextuality and a re-reading process. It is thus not *Genesis*, but *Genesis* revisited: *Paradise*. What the

beginning of *Paradise* then enacts, I would argue, is the predicament of a beginning that precludes the fantasy of an absolute point of origin.

<4> The inaccessibility of a point of origin, in the novel *Paradise* is a condition that cannot be considered in the present text's isolation. It is rather, I would argue, a Modernist condition. At this point, I suggest to consider two further intertexts in order to understand *Paradise's* beginning and the seemingly referenceless deixes that it presents: Freud as a Modernist intertext and Foucault as a commentator of the Modernist condition: Freud in his essay "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" of 1914 defines the concept of what his translator James Strachey has termed *deferred action*, concept called *Nachträglichkeit* in the German original. It describes the phenomenon of a highly important childhood event which then, that is in childhood, is experienced without understanding, but which retroactively can be endowed with meaning and interpretation. For Freud, the concept of deferred action is a vital process engaged in neurosis formation. Retroactive attribution of meaning is thus, one could claim after Freud, a universal phenomenon in the human being, but it is at the same time also a phenomenon, which, according to Foucault, is a particularly Modernist condition:

> In modern thought, such an origin is no longer conceivable: we have seen how labour, life, and language acquired their own historicity, in which they are embedded; they could never, therefore, truly express their origin, even though, from the inside, their whole history is, as it were directed towards it. It is no longer origin that gives rise to historicity; it is historicity that, in its very fabric, makes possible the necessity of an origin which must be both internal and foreign to it […]. (Foucault, *The Order of Things* 329)

Foucault makes a point about the impossibility of man being contemporaneous with his own origin. "Origin for man," he writes "is much more the way in which man in general, any man, articulates himself upon the already begun of labour, life, and language." (330)

The intertextual references in Morrison, references to this paradox temporality described by Freud as a universal human trait and by Foucault as a characteristic proper to the Modernist subject position Morrison's text in a historico-cultural continuum, which spans from *Genesis* to the turn of the 20th century and beyond. This chronotopical condensation, which the beginning of *Paradise* presents, endows the

novel with an epistemological scope that could well be read into the deicitically precarious "out here." [2]

<5> But what is it that makes this beginning not only one that is rooted in the biblical tradition and Modernism, but also one that is rooted in an American discourse? What is it that makes Morrison's text particularly American? Frederick Turner in 1893 identifies the particularly spatial nature of American development and the paramount importance of the frontier, the liminal and more importantly, I would argue, the compulsive return to the frontier:

> […] American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. (Turner, *The Frontier in American History* 1)

The American cultural imaginary, then, is one that is not only characterized by its explicit spatiality, but also one that constantly re-thinks itself at the locus of the frontier, the liminal. This fantasy space of perpetual historical and cultural becoming is one that Morrison is inscribed in, but more importantly, one that she undertakes to revise from the perspective of a historically marginalized group; the African American who discursively has been thought of in function of the economic possibility of a westward expansion. A marginalization necessary for the spatial expansion and the unfolding of the colonial settlers, as well as the Modern subject, according to Richard Slotkin:

> The original ideological task of the Myth was to explain and justify the establishment of the American colonies; but as the colonies expanded and developed, the Myth was called on to account for our rapid economic growth, our emergence as a powerful nation-state, and our distinctively American approach to the socially and culturally disruptive processes of modernization. (1992: 10)

The spatial as a particular characteristic of American identity formation is thus a constantly revisited and a particularly pertinent topos of American Modernism. To be noted here shall be Slotkin's use of the inclusive pronoun "our" in "our […] growth,

our emergence […]" etc. An inclusion and participatory status which Morrison's characters cannot readily assume but instead need to negotiate in a laborious process of narrativization.

<6> Morrison's texts are at once situated in this American cultural imaginary, but always also, and this is the political project, engaged in a revisionist project of the American space; in a reformulation and re-mapping of a world:

> I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest.
> (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 3)

And this is what she does indeed at the beginning of *Paradise*. She draws a map, which, through its spatial destabilization and imperative to re-orientate proposes an alternative return to the frontier, to the beginning, self-consciously enacting a beginning, which can never be absolute, which needs to be returned to. In this the text is analogous to the American spatial discourse of the frontier, but it is also a re-writing in reverse. First comes the infraction, a violent penetration of the paradisiac space, a beginning more historically and culturally congruent with the traumatic history of slavery. And only in a laborious process of re-narrativization can utopia be thought about and indeed problematized. Only in a process of re-narrativization can the utopian space be conceived of as a therapeutic integral part of a discursive African American rehabilitation.

Jazz. The Pleasure of Epistemological Re-mapping

<7> Less explicit at first sight as far as intertextual references to the American discourse of the frontier are concerned, but nonetheless forcefully present if subjected to close scrutiny, are the opening words of Morrison's novel *Jazz*, published in 1992. More than in *Paradise*, they also enact the *pleasure* and the *desire* that form an integral part of the project of a reconfiguration of a spatial cultural imaginary through the establishment of a spatial poetics:

> Sth. I know that woman. (3)

As to its deictic insecurities, *Jazz*' beginning is similar to that of *Paradise*: "*That* woman:" she is not here, but there. Not yet identified, she is unnamed and distanced.

This beginning brings together two poles of a particular geography by establishing their distance in the first place: the two coordinates of this territory are the "I" figure at one end, and "that woman" at the other end. "I" is fundamentally close and prototypically subjective. "That woman" is over there, at a distance; she is everything that is not "I". However, this relational geography that stretches between the two figures uncannily hovers over the idea of a more haptic or graspable one, as it were, a more down-to-earth place where people interact. Who is "I" and who is "that woman" and where are they, that is, in what broader context or space is their distance situated? How can we make sense of their distance if there is no information about the two figures' respective immediate vicinity?

<8> In fact, a way out of this disorientation may be found if we pursue the following presupposition: the initial territory of *Jazz* becomes the very aesthetic function which ultimately enables the operation of re-mapping. The beginning of *Jazz* fails, or rather does not 'intend' to provide a mere stage on which the "I" and "that woman" will co-operate to become text. Nor does this space in *Jazz* provide environmental analogies that constitute character: there is no topos to flesh out figures; there is neither "structure of the topos" that, in a Lotmanian understanding, "emerges as the language for expressing other, non-spatial relations in the text […]." (1977: 231) Instead, this initial territory establishes the possibility of a very particular epistemology that is inextricably tied up with a spatial imaginary.

Because in between, that is in between "I" and "that woman", lies the promise of knowledge and familiarity: "I *know* that woman." In fact, however, this knowledge, this epistemology, is not immediately accessible; at the beginning of the text we know nothing as of yet: the "I" is just as unknown to a reader as is "that woman." Having read Roland Barthes and Morrison's *Paradise*, however, we have learned that knowledge will only come about through re-reading. Again, it is only retroactively that the characters as well as their relationship to each other become intelligible. In fact, "to know" in *Jazz* becomes the pivotal point of an epistemological orientation and it can be argued that "to know" contains the entire textual geography that the text will establish in the course of the narrative. In order to find out what this *terra incognita* of "knowing" exactly constitutes, we must ever revisit the boundary, the textual frontier and come back to the beginning. Because only through the return to that initial territory, which in its essence contains the nomenclature of everything

there is to know, only through that return can we really start thinking about what that knowledge exactly is; only through the return to the beginning can we see that "knowing" is that which is at stake. And it is only then that we learn that "knowing" is embedded in a deictically precarious geography and that it is there alone where a new map of the American cultural imaginary can be created. Because not only does the beginning of *Jazz*, just as that of *Paradise*, leave time and space "undefined" (as does *Genesis*) and thus enacts the concern of what Auerbach terms the "historically becoming", but it also situates itself within the American discourse of spatiality, and with this, of course, the negotiation of the locus of the frontier—locus that itself is inherently precarious.

<9> At this point it is important to recognize that "knowledge" in *Jazz* offers an alternative apprehension to what Morrison identifies to be the "validity or vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics […] circulated as knowledge." (1992: 4) "This knowledge," Morrison argues, "holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first Africans and then African Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence […] has had no significant place of consequence in the origin and development of that culture's literature." (5) Indeed, Morrison does create such a "significant place" and retroactively endows the origin of "that culture's literature" with her version of knowledge – knowledge which considers the African American presence to be an integral part of America's cultural imaginary. "To know" in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* is a constant process, ever to be reviewed; not so much a static condition, not so much a finalized and finalizable process, but a dynamic project; imperative, ultimately, for the understanding of her political project of re-mapping.

In such an understanding, Morrison can be considered epistemologically akin to Nietzsche who, in *The Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1837), poignantly codifies the existential necessity of knowledge remaining ever dynamic: "History, conceived as pure knowledge, once it becomes sovereign, would be a kind of conclusion to living and a final reckoning for humanity." (1998: 7) Through the inauguration of the spatial paradigm, the incipit of *Jazz* could be understood to enact the impossibility of "knowledge" becoming history and thus static and eventually fatal. Also, "knowing" in Morrison must be 'territorial', in the sense of being in and of territory. It is only

there that an alternative version of knowledge can come into existence and where it can be poetologically established—establishment of both a spatial poetics and a poetics of space that can and must ever be revisited.

While "to know" in *Jazz* presents a reader with an intellectual necessity and desire to increase information and to become familiar with interpersonal and geographical relations, "to know" also, in perfect deconstructive manner, constitutes the enigma as to what that knowledge exactly comprises: some thing, some intellectual substance necessary for orientation that is located somewhere between the beginning of the text and its revisiting. It is, in fact, precisely that enigma which perpetuates and ensures the "perennial" return to the beginning in the first place; that is the frontier which is the privileged locus of renewal and rethinking; and it is there that the desire to find closure in the origin is enacted, while at the same time sensing that such closure is ever withheld because it is subject to a circular teleology.

<10> Yet, the map that covers the territory between "I" and "that woman," and that sheathes the enigmatic "knowledge", must be further extended into what Toni Morrison (1992: 3) hopes to become a "wider landscape:" the very first word, or rather, sound, in *Jazz* is a kind of immediate vocal interpellation: "Sth." Not quite identifiable as to its precise meaning, we ask ourselves whether it is an expression of disdain and disrespect or a demand for silence. This sound disrupts the fantasy of a closed textual space. It in fact unsettles the illusion of textual self-containment; it reaches beyond, wanting to make itself heard, or maybe wanting to silence that "knowledge" which is so problematically exclusive of the African American presence and which does not account for the latter's participation in the conception of the country's origin. The interpellative immediacy of "Sth" offers another vantage point in the form of an address, an invocation almost, that is simultaneously directed inwards and outwards: inwards towards the text that is about to unfold, and outwards towards the possibility of readership and intertextuality. In that, "Sth" is the most explicit enactment of the concept of the boundary in *Jazz*, dramatizing the here and beyond simultaneously, while coming into discursive being along the syntagmatic line of words.

<11> The textual boundary in *Jazz* does, however, not only perform the political project of an epistemological rethinking at the liminal. The opening sound, "Sth" and

the ensuing affirmation, "I know that woman," also encapsulate the erotic *pleasure* that lies in "knowing" the textual geography between the (problematic because paradoxically unknown) intimacy of "I" and the distance of "that woman." It is, in the first instance, i.e. thematically, the pleasure of the novel's protagonist's adolescent, almost infantile understanding of sexuality, or rather, the discourse of sexuality at the end of the novel. But it is also, and more importantly, the pleasure that comes with re-reading, with constantly having to revisit the boundary and the frontier. *Jazz*' beginning in fact condenses both the *imperative* and the *desire* to think and re-think the boundary: at the end of the novel, the protagonist has found her poetic voice and can articulate the pleasure that comes about through the negotiation of what is self and what is other; of what is here and what is beyond:

> It's nice when grown people whisper to each other under the covers. Their ecstasy is more leaf-sigh than bray and the body is the vehicle, not the point. They reach, grown people, for something beyond, way beyond and way, way down underneath tissue. […] They are under the covers because they don't have to look at themselves anymore; there is no stud's eye, no chippie glance to undo them. They are inward toward the other, bound and joined by carnival dolls and the steamers that sailed from the ports they never saw. That is what is beneath their undercover whispers. (228)

Reconsidering the initially indeterminable sound "Sth" (Is it an expression of disdain? Is it a demand for silence?) in the light of the novel's ending, a more specific reading can unfold: "Sth" becomes tantamount to the "leaf-sigh" whispers of sexual and textual desire. The entire text, which spans between beginning and end, becomes the whispered discourse of desire: a desire, physical and indeed geographical, that is constituted by the negotiation of what is here and what is "beyond, way beyond." Desire also, textual, which is "way, way down underneath tissue:" underneath the fabrication of textual, textural and textile tissue.

Love. The Female Body as Liminality

<12> A chiastic inversion of the very two geographical coordinates that, in *Jazz*, delimit the initial territory of the incipit, that is the distance between "I" and "that woman," a chiastic inversion thereof then, demarcates the territory established at the beginning of Toni Morrison's novel *Love*, published in 2003:

> The Woman's legs are spread wide open, so I hum. (3)

Unlike in *Jazz*, "the woman" is situated at the one end of *Love*'s territory, while "I" is at the other end. "The woman" here is not only geographically closer, but she is also accorded a more prototypical function than in *Jazz*: she is not "*that* woman" but "*the* woman:" the definite affirmation of her gender. Self-confidently gendered she is indeed, but precariously sexualized she is too. The pornographic immediacy that a reader is presented with at the beginning of *Love* finds a disconcertingly voyeuristic confirmation in the ensuing lines: "Men grow irritable, but they know it's all for them. They relax. Standing by, unable to do anything but watch, is a trial, but I don't say a word." (3) Instead of the promise of intellectual satisfaction that lies between the opening lines of *Jazz*, *Love* places the female body as the function of male desire between "the woman" and the subjectivity of "I." What is this territory that so disturbingly condenses the woman as the bearer of the beginning? Of biological and textual offspring on the one hand and the woman as the very locus, so to speak, where such a beginning is violated on the other hand? Apart from an immediate ethical concern, I would argue that this beginning problematizes an aspect of the American cultural imaginary that is inextricably bound up with the conception of its territorial beginning. If the frontier is, according to Turner, "the meeting point between savagery and civilization," (1921, 1996: 1) and if that meeting point is the very place where westward advance and development is made possible, then the "savage" is reduced to mere functionality. Fundamentally connected to the notion of the "savage" is, according to Klarer (2013), the latent presence of an eroticized, innocent femininity, which enters the American cultural imaginary through the Pocahontas myth, inaugurated and narrativized by John Smith in his *General History of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* of 1624. (cf. Klarer 18) In such a conception of the frontier, namely in that it is an eroticized place, westward expansion also, at least discursively, becomes tantamount to the penetration of the female body, economically justified and expedited.

The, in *Love*'s case, indeed violently enigmatic beginning ultimately situates itself within the same circular teleology as the other novels, and can, thus, only fully be comprehended once, after arriving at the text's ending, the beginning is read anew.

<13> The query for an origin, both in its temporal as well as in its spatial understanding, is indeed vital und universally human if we think with Freud. It is also an explicitly Modernist one if we think with Foucault. It is further constitutionally

American if we think with Turner and Slotkin. Ruland and Bradbury maintain that the origin of "what we now call American literature" (1992: 3) is a conglomerate of the spatial reality of the settlers and European discursive traditions: it "came from the meeting between the land with its elusive and usually despised "Indians" and the discoverers and settlers who left the developed, literate cultures of Renaissance Europe." (3) And it is the cogently self-conscious use of the spatial metaphors of the "direction" and the "intersection" with which Ruland and Bradbury, the authors of *A History of American Literature*, condense their understanding of the country's literary origin: "[…] the main direction of the recorded American literary imagination […] was formed from the intersection between the European Renaissance mind and the new and wondrous land in the West the settlers found—between the myths they brought and those they learned or constructed after they came." (4) In fact, it is also in Ruland and Bradbury that we learn that the very notion of the origin for American literature is a problematic one, because "[w]e cannot trace its roots directly back into the mists of American antiquity," nor can we "hunt its origins in the remote springs of its language and culture, or follow it through from the oral to the written, then from manuscript to book." (3) Instead, "millenarian and Utopian expectations were already attached to this new land." (5) Thus, the search for the beginnings of American literature is indeed a predicament that precludes the fantasy of an absolute point of origin: the "already there", the chronotopical antecedence is always inscribed in the concept of America's discursive genesis.

<14> In Toni Morrison, the search for an origin, both geographical and biographical, is also a constitutive part of African American identity. The textual nature of Morrison's enactment of boundaries, and the epistemological scope that her beginnings of novels contain in their essence, in a condensed form, hold the promise of an autarchy, a discursive identity constitution, which can be dissociated from actual geographies of America. In that they have a supra-geographical quality which simultaneously accounts for the very spatiality of the hegemonic discourse in which Morrison's fiction has to situate itself and quite literally find its place, but which at the same time can be dissociated from it, having a discursive force, which is indeed trans- and supra-geographical. And yet, it is precisely this rethinking and the establishment of an alternative spatial poetics that makes Morrison's text very clearly American: the condition and indeed the fantasy of being in-the-place and at the same

time out-of-place, pivoting around the locus of the boundary, the frontier; that is, the liminal.

<15> Beginnings of Toni Morrison's novels are an unsettlingly beautiful dramatization of the liminal. They advocate a re-orientation in an American spatial imaginary by proposing an alternative spatial poetics. African American discursive emancipation must come about through a critical reflection on the frontier myth, a textual destabilization thereof and a subsequent reformulation of territory. Morrison's poetics is a revision of the American cultural imaginary that distances itself explicitly from the mechanisms which produced slavery as a necessary constituent of its national becoming: that is conquest of territory through westward expansion and a continual return to the border. Morrison's project is political without subscribing to the economic and violently expansive appropriation of American soil. She draws a textual map, which is an imperative to re-orientate in a discursive space, a network of inter-and intratextual trajectories. And it is in her beginnings of novels, I would argue, that this imperative comes about in an aesthetically condensed form. A liminal moment, which contains the essence of her subversive map-making.

Bibliography

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis*. 1949. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imaginations: Four Essays*. Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Foucault, Michel. "The Retreat and Return of the Origin." *The Order of Things.* Trans. R.D. Laing. New York: Pantheon Books, 1970. 328-335.

Freud, Sigmund. "Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten." 1914. Freud Studienausgabe. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1989.

Klarer, Mario. *Literaturgeschichte der USA*. München: C.H. Beck, 2013.

Laplanche, Jean and J.-B. Pontalis. The Language of Psychoanalysis. 1967. Trans. Donald Nicholson Smith. New York and London: Norton, 1973.

Lotman. Jurij. *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. 1971. Trans. Gail Lenhoff et al. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1977.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.* New York: Random House, 1992.

———. *Jazz*. 1992. London: Vintage, 2001.

———. *Paradise*. 1997. London: Vintage, 1999.

———. *Love*. 2003. London: Vintage, 2004.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*. 1837. Trans. Ian Johnston. Theophania Publishing, 1998.

Pontalis, J.-B. *L'amour des commencements*. 1986. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.

Ruland, Richard and Malcolm Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism. A History of American Literature*. London and New York: Penguin, 1992.

Tally, Robert T. Jr. *Spatiality*. The New Critical Idiom. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Frontier in American History*. 1893. New York: Henry Holt, 1921.
Online text provided by the University of Virginia, Michael W Kidd (1996). http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/TURNER/home.html, accessed 16 April, 2013.

Notes

[1] In their handbook *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (orig. *Le vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (1967)), Laplanche and Pontalis point to and emphasize the literal meaning of the verb 'to regress' for the understanding of the concept of "regression", namely to "walk back, to retrace one's steps–which can be understood as readily in a logical or spatial sense as in a temporal one." (386) The Freudian conception of regression differentiates between a topographical, a temporal and a formal one. Implicit in each of the categories is a spatio-temporal metaphorization of the psychic apparatus. The term "regression" shall here be understood as "a revision to earlier forms in the development of thought, of object-relationships or of the structure of behaviour." (386) While mainly considered pathological in psychoanalysis and modern psychology, "regression" in the present study's use will also want to emphasize the affirmative, comforting and ultimately creative aspect that is implied in (and acknowledged by the clinical discourse) retreating to an earlier stage. Earlier stage can here readily be synonymized with the notion of paradise. Regression is thus the harkening back to a textual and discursive past of paradise including its terminological connotation of familiarity and safety.

[2] In order to fully comprehend Morrison's embedding in and comment on the Modernist tradition, and the intertextual dialogue she entertains with it in terms of narratological and aesthetic specificities, a comparative reading of Morrison's texts with texts by Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner are imperative—a reading, however, that cannot be pursued here.